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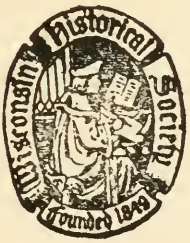
THE MILITARY EDUCATION OF GRANT AS GENERAL

BY
COLONEL ARTHUR L. CONGER



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GENERAL GRANT

From a photograph presented to the Wisconsin Historical Society by Mr. J. H. Evans of Platteville. Mr. Evans, who knew Grant during his Galena period, was in Memphis in November, 1862, where he chanced to see the General come out of a photographer's shop. Entering, he engaged a copy of this picture which had just been taken.

THE MILITARY EDUCATION OF GRANT AS GENERAL

Colonel Arthur L. Conger

In a conversation a few weeks ago an officer of high rank in our army, who had himself exercised a higher command during the late war, said to me: "I become more and more curious to learn the habits and nature of the military geniuses of the past. I suppose they were geniuses—but we did not have any such in the late war. In that the leaders were all mediocre people who knew very little and who owed their positions to other qualities."

Many years ago this same baffling lustre of fable, shadowing the lives and deeds of past military heroes and making of them creatures of a different sort from the men of our own time, led me on a quest into the secrets of their genius. And, if I now choose Grant as a typical case for critical investigation it is not from any desire to evade the questions connected with the leaders in later wars or to divert attention back into the now neglected realm of our former military history, but because Grant is one of the most recent examples of a military leader concerning whom we have access to the sources requisite, and yet far enough removed to permit their dispassionate examination.

The spirit of this inquiry is not one of captiousness. The subject is approached with a sincere admiration for the character and ability of the man who, through his own efforts and profiting by his opportunities, developed a capacity beyond that of any other general of his time or of his nation. Others may have possessed greater talents; no other has proved them by his actual conduct in command of great armies in a war of magnitude.

Before taking up Grant's career, permit me a preliminary plowing of the ground by way of a few military truisms: First, Generalship, in its military sense, is the art of leading masses of men in campaigns or battles; it excludes the rôles

and functions of a troop, battery, company, or regimental commander and begins with those of a brigade, division, or higher unit commander.

Second, The problems confronting a general increase in difficulty and in their demands on his powers and knowledge in proportion to the size of his command. They become very involved and complex when his command passes beyond the 60,000 (or modern army corps) stage and become supremely difficult when his command passes the 200,000 (or modern army) stage, so that it has to operate as separate armies or army groups.

Third, The burdens upon the shoulders of an independent commander are vastly greater than the burdens upon those of a subordinate commander regardless of the size of the command. Thus it is harder to command a brigade acting independently than a division acting as part of an army corps, or to command a division acting independently than a corps acting as part of an army.

Fourth, Contrary to the popular conception, victory or defeat is not a sound criterion of good generalship. Both the opposing commanders may be good generals, or both may be poor generals; yet, if the armies fight, one must win and the other lose. Though the leader of one army may be superior to his opponent in generalship, yet the condition of the troops as to discipline or morale, the proportionate number of combatants, or amount of material on each side, or other factors, such as terrain, supplies, transportation, or even the weather, may still determine the issue of the combat or campaign.

Hence, in judging the generalship displayed in any given case, we cannot conclude, as in a prize fight, that the best man won, but must review the general's decisions and acts in the light of the situation as it presented itself to him. We may blame him for failing to take the measures necessary to inform himself about the actual situation, but so far as his

actions and orders are concerned, we must view them in the actual setting of the moment. Was the order given clear, definite, and forceful—suited, not to us with our fuller knowledge, but to the man or men to whom issued? Nor are the results obtained to be left out of consideration. Were the results obtained worth the cost—that is the wastage in men and their morale, the expenditure or loss of material, the gain or loss of prestige or territory?

On the purely personal side we cannot as judge or jury condemn any American general prior to this late war for accepting a military command without possessing the knowledge requisite to ensure a reasonable hope of success to his government or warrant the expectation in his officers and men that, if their lives were spent, they would be spent at least in a justifiable or rational effort for the common cause. For, until after the Spanish War, we never had in this country any school where the principles of troop leadership of any force larger than a regiment were either studied or taught; nor did our army afford any opportunity for the exercise of such leadership. Between wars we had never had organized, except on paper, a general officer's command. The consequences were that no one knew that any special knowledge was required to exercise effective command of a brigade or higher unit and—as the inevitable corollary to this ignorance—that each citizen secretly believed in his heart that he was the one man divinely inspired by Providence to lead his fellow citizens in battle.

Let us turn now to Grant's first exercise of a general's command in battle, at Belmont. The nature of the affair is well known. Grant was ordered to create a diversion. To do so he embarked two brigades comprising five regiments of infantry, two troops of cavalry, and a battery (in all 3,000 men) on transports at Cairo and sailed under naval convoy down the Mississippi, landing on the morning of November 7, 1861 a few miles north of Belmont, marched

overland, attacked and captured a Confederate post defended by 2,000 men, but did not capture the men. His command became demoralized, pillaging the captured camp. Reinforcing Confederate troops crossed the river from Columbus and, by maneuvering to cut off their retreat, drove Grant's men in confusion back to their transports. One regiment was indeed cut off, but by the wit of its colonel and good luck it managed ultimately to get back to the transports.

Let us examine Grant's rôle in this affair.

His first act upon landing was to detail a battalion to remain as reserve. Was this correct? Assuming that Grant knew the ground, a battalion (200 to 600 men) should not have been left back "as reserve." It was justifiable to leave a small transport guard.

He then marched toward Belmont to a crossroad where the two brigades were deployed side by side in single line.

Were the time, place, and method of deployment justified?

As to the time, we have no information on which to judge. As to place, two of the regiments were deployed directly behind a pond which apparently could not be crossed. Thus, when orders were given to attack, the right regiment went ahead, but the next two regiments had to reform column and march around the pond; they then took up a false direction of attack, crossing the line of the two left regiments which had meantime also lost their direction and gone to the extreme right in an attempt to close in on the right regiment. Hence the place of deployment cannot be justified, at least as a place for the deployment of the whole force.

As to the method of deployment we know that two companies of each regiment were sent forward as skirmishers. The remainder of the regiments were deployed in a single continuous line without battalion supports, or without brigade reserves, or without a general reserve, since the battal-

ion left at the transports two miles away could not properly be so designated.

Such a formation for an attack in woods involved inevitably everything that followed. The first attack might win or lose; if it lost, the whole command would become demoralized; if it won, it would become disorganized, and the least reserve held out by the enemy would suffice to defeat it. As to what followed, the Confederate commander, Pillow, did not hold out a reserve and was in the same situation as Grant until reinforcements sent by Polk across the river turned the tide.

Under the circumstances was Grant's order to attack justified? Grant knew the enemy's strength; he knew the opposing commander. The attack formation was of course the best he knew, and he trusted perhaps in the justice of the Union cause for success. As he saw the situation it was correct, and today it must be considered correct. That order to attack was Grant's last act as commander that day. Not having any reserve he had no further influence on the course of events, for his so-called reserve at the transports broke and ran with the rest. It was a case of *sauve qui peut.*

What did Grant not suffer and learn through the long hours of that day! Brigade Commander on the line—yet unable to influence it; having no reserve; seeing his troops turn first into a mob of looters, then into a rabble of fugitives, without cohesion or power of united action; thinking of that lost regiment which he knew to be cut off! Though the regiment finally worked its way through the woods and reached the transports, how must Grant have dreaded in the meantime having to return to Cairo to report defeat and the loss of that Twenty-seventh Regiment of Illinois Infantry! I can sympathize with him in that as I had a brigade myself in the Argonne with a lost battalion. I hasten to add that I did not lose it, it having been lost before I was given command of the brigade; but I know how Grant must have felt.

So much for his first fight in command. We can give him all possible credit for being willing to fight and for sensing the enemy's weakness; but on the side of professional knowledge of how to fight we must give him zero. Had he done in France what he did at Belmont, and been found out, he would have been sent to Blois and demoted or discharged; had he made that deployment and advance against a trained general on the other side, assuming the troops as they were, he and his command would have been killed or captured. The affair approximated Moltke's description of our Civil War, "Two armed mobs chasing each other around the country, from which nothing could be learned." Moltke was wrong in this last; Grant did learn from it. Further, if it was Grant's first lesson in bitterness under military responsibility, it was by no means his first lesson in human bitterness.

Grant had not wanted to go to West Point, had in that primitive institution remained as one apart—in it but not of it. In the Mexican War he had seen an army torn by intrigues and jealousies, bungling through by sheer weight of superiority of race, in spite of total lack by the officers of scientific knowledge of war. After that war he had shared in the debasement of the army, turning, in ignorance of any professional knowledge or study, to gambling, hunting, and intoxication for amusement. Finally, hounded out of the army, a failure as an officer, he proved likewise a failure as a farmer and barely able to make a living as a helper in a store.

After these intellectually as well as financially lean years in civil life, what must not have been the bitterness in Grant's soul, as he saw his fellow graduates from West Point commissioned as generals to bear high responsibilities in the day of their country's need, while he, an outcast, met no response to his tender of his services as an officer, awaited in vain in McClellan's anteroom an opportunity to seek a

humble staff appointment, and finally was able only through his knowledge of army routine to gain employment as a clerk to make out muster rolls? Grant did not scorn this humble duty; he performed it like a man and, having performed it, was given his reward by being made colonel of a regiment so insubordinate and even mutinous that no one else dared command it.

But these humiliations had done for Grant something that life had not done for many other generals in the Civil or any other war; they had made him look reality squarely in the face. If Grant approached the problem of leadership in war much less tutored in the professional part than a savage chieftain, at least he knew himself and his own capacity unflinchingly to take punishment. He might make mistakes, but he would not conceal from himself the fact that he had made them, nor would he be so overcome by emotion that he could not learn from these mistakes how to avoid repeating them.

It was two months after Belmont before Grant again showed the will to fight. Early in January he began to ask Halleck, the Department Commander, to let him attack Fort Henry. In February, three months after Belmont, Halleck let him go. How had Grant spent the intervening time?

What he should have done was to equip his troops, organize his troops, organize a staff, train his command, particularly his higher officers. There is no evidence as to what he tried to do. The probability is that Grant, not having any competent staff, or not knowing how to use one, let his time be eaten up by details of administration. Certain it is that his troops were relatively no better prepared for Henry than they had been for Belmont. They were more highly organized on paper, but it was, so to speak, a deathbed organization, made at the last moment before going in, and, in the modern sense of the term, no organiza-

tion. Grant had not yet developed a staff; and if he made any attempt to train his officers they failed to show it. The elements in Grant's favor were that the troops showed evidences of little better discipline and drill, and Grant himself now knew a few things to be avoided so far as concerned his own orders and action; that his troops had had a taste of gunpowder which their new opponents had not; and that Grant now had under his command C. F. Smith, one of the best, if not the best, of the officers in the Union army at that time.

The landing for the attack on Forts Henry and Heiman was made about six miles above the forts on the Tennessee River. The command was to march at dawn on February 6: one stronger column (three brigades under McClernand) to attack the land side of Fort Henry; one weaker column (two brigades under C. F. Smith) to attack Fort Heiman; while the gunboat fleet under Commodore Foote brought the forts under gun fire. Note that General Grant now has a reserve of one brigade which is to follow between the two columns along the river bank.

Here we see Grant digesting but not yet assimilating his experience. He had a reserve this time and he stayed with it. The result is pathetic. There was no road along the river and the reserve could not go anywhere. McClernand got out on his road and, not having any will to fight, was seized with panic, halted, and did nothing. About noon the navy brought Fort Henry under fire and the raw Confederate troops were terror-stricken by the mere sound of the shells, all but a few of which went harmlessly overhead. The infantry garrison ran away, and the artillerists and the general commanding the river fort surrendered to the gunboats. An hour or two later McClernand, resuming the march with his column, reached the fort, and some hours later Grant, learning the news, came up to find his plans for capturing the garrison gone awry. Smith arrived toward evening at the abandoned Fort Heiman.

Can we approve Grant's march order?

Clearly he had drawn too broad a deduction from his Belmont experience. There he wished he had had a reserve and wished he had stayed with it; here he had had one and had stayed with it but had not needed the reserves and found himself during the critical hours absent from the scene of action, powerless to influence events. Even after the surrender of the fort and the arrival of McClernand things had gone on all wrong according to Grant's opinion.

No wonder that, having his hoped-for battle fizzle out under his eyes, he yearned to attack Fort Donelson. Was nothing ever to go right?

Five days later he began the march from the Tennessee Valley across to the Cumberland Valley to attack Fort Donelson. Note the assimilation of experience here. He organizes a right column, a left column, and a reserve; but the reserve does not attempt to follow across country; it follows by the best road, and Grant himself rides where he belongs, at the head of the main body of the right or main column.

That decision may seem simple to the reader, but, after plunging into the fog of the Civil War as I have, and discovering McClelland and Burnside and nearly all the rest doing the same wrong things time and again and never reflecting, never seeing that they were wrong, and then coming upon Grant learning these simple lessons that we today learn at our school of the line and staff college, learning them one at a time and haltingly, but learning them, the contrast between the man capable of learning and the incapables is so vivid that one does not wonder that the man who learned also rose to command all the armies of the United States.

But more lessons were to come to Grant at Donelson. Arriving before the Fort on the afternoon of February 12, Grant is seen applying what he thought were the lessons of Fort Henry, trying to extend his line to the right to cut off

the escape of the garrison. Smith, now a division commander, has put in his command in scientific formation, that is distributed in depth, skirmishers, firing line, supports, brigade reserves, and a whole brigade as divisional reserve. McClernand, on the right, has his command, also a division of three brigades, strung out in one single line, not a single reserve back of it! Does Grant commend Smith and chide McClernand? Not at all. He urges on McClernand to extend still more and keeps pushing him out to the right in an effort to extend the line to the river above Fort Donelson. Not appreciating correctly the difference between the Fort Henry and the Fort Donelson situations, he even takes the reserve brigade which General C. F. Smith had so carefully treasured up and uses it with other fresh troops, brought up the Cumberland River by transport, to create a third division under Wallace which is used further to attenuate the line, now backed only by the scanty reserves Smith has been able to save from Grant's lavish dispersion—now characterized in our schools as the favorite tactical sin of the beginner.

Grant evidently expected to repeat the naval history of Fort Henry with the difference that this time the army would have arrived to receive the surrender by the time the gunboats had shelled the fort into submission. Had the navy been a school-trained, and not an experienced-trained navy, with not much experience at that, Grant's expectations in this regard might still have been fulfilled. But the navy stuck to its "closing-in" tactics so successful at Henry, but fatally inapplicable here.

Tactics is very simple; but one has to know which rule to apply. Henry was a water battery; Donelson was a hill battery with nearly all short-range guns. At Donelson the gunboats with their weapons of superior range and effectiveness had only to stand off and destroy the fort batteries at their leisure and then ascend the river and rake the garrison

fore and aft until it surrendered. Instead, the fleet steamed in to short range from where it could not reach the hill battery with its guns, but where the short-range guns of the fort could fire on the fleet so effectively as to compel it to drop out of action.

This happened on the fourteenth. Grant, seemingly, was taken aback. The Fort Donelson forces, strongly reinforced and jubilant over their victory over the gunboats, thought only of attacking and of destroying Grant's land forces. Thus while Grant, unconscious of the unsoundness of his dispositions, without even the forethought to place Smith, his next ranking officer, in temporary command, went down the river and aboard the flagship to arrange further naval co-operation, the Confederate forces were forming for attack with high hopes of success.

The Confederate plan of General Pillow was similar to that of Lee later in the same year at Mechanicsville and Gaines's Mill. Both attacks were to take advantage of an over-extended Union right flank and the absence of Union reserves back of it. Both Pillow's and Lee's attacks were bungled in about the same way and both, in spite of the bungling, were reasonably successful. The difference was that after Grant's command, or half of it, had been destroyed, Grant, returning to the battlefield, was met by Smith, who begged permission to counter attack with his still treasured portion of reserves. Grant consented; he could hardly refuse his former revered instructor at West Point!

Curiously enough, the same counter measure to Lee's attack was suggested to McClellan. Had he accepted the offer of his corps commander who wished to attack Richmond he might have gone through and brought a speedy end to the war in 1862. However, there was at that time no C. F. Smith in the Army of the Potomac who knew enough to treasure up reserves and be prepared for all eventualities, and therefore McClellan and his Army of the Potomac went down the James River in shame and defeat.

After the surrender of Fort Donelson, Grant was as one stunned. The new situation was one outside his experience. He proposed tentatively to Halleck an advance on Nashville. He does not appear to have seen the rich fruits of victory open to his grasp as he had seen the opportunity for attacking Fort Donelson after the fall of Fort Henry.

Possibly the Civil War schoolmaster, experience, stepped in to save embarrassment at this critical juncture and to keep Grant from growing conceited over the success, to which he was so little accustomed, of his partly earned Donelson victory, and at the same time, which was most important, afford him leisure for reflection on his mistakes and their consequences. At any rate friction with Halleck, since explained away as owing to the suppression of messages by a traitorous telegrapher, resulted in Grant's being relieved from command and placed in virtual arrest for over a week. Meanwhile Halleck ordered his command sent up the Tennessee, which movement was executed under the orders of C. F. Smith. Unhappily for Grant and for the Union, Smith, wounded at Donelson, soon after had to be relieved from duty and shortly afterwards died. Grant, restored to duty, found his army encamped at Pittsburg Landing near Shiloh without outposts, without reconnoissance, without secret service, without camps laid out on any systematic plan, without instruction of officers, without camp maps, good roads, or guideposts.

Grant failed to perceive the lack of these requisites. Indeed, he seems at Shiloh to have struck the low water mark of his military education. He has been blamed for failure to intrench, but the criticism does not come from any competent source. He is not properly chargeable with shunning preparations for a defensive fight; he is chargeable with neglecting to prepare his officers and men for any kind of battle at all, like the improvident father who brings up his son only to spend money and then suddenly goes under in a panic, leaving the son stranded and helpless.

Grant was undoubtedly disgruntled over his unjust treatment by Halleck; but the main factor was, I believe, that he was still dazed by the Donelson crisis. The civilian does not realize the strain of command in action nor the time necessary to recover from its effects. Grant had had three months between Belmont and Henry-Donelson; his teacher, experience, gave him only fifty days between Donelson and Shiloh, and, even with the enforced inaction of ten days, this was not enough.

Grant was caught mentally as unprepared for the battle as was his command. He and his army were saved by the mistakes of the visionary and inexperienced Confederate general, A. S. Johnston, and by the firm adherence by Grant to the same policy Smith had taught him under the stress at Donelson: to prepare a reserve for counterattack. Grant had no C. F. Smith at Shiloh to pave an easy way for a counterattack; but a reserve was gradually and finally built up, and it brought eventual success.

We have already said—and this is as true today as in Grant's time—that tactical success is assured by adherence to very simple principles. The difficulty exists only in knowing when and how to apply them. Thus, for example, nearly every decisive victory has been gained by the right use of reserves withheld from action until the arrival of the timely moment. Nearly every great general has been taught this lesson by bitter experience: Napoleon learned it at Marengo; Moltke at Koeniggratz. In both cases their reserves came on the field at the critical moment by accident. Napoleon ever after planned his battles to occur like the "accident" at Marengo; Moltke did the same. Lee should have learned this lesson at Frazier's Farm. Jackson learned it early and while he lived applied it, for Lee, with excellent results. Lee himself did not master it until his bitter failure at Gettysburg brought home to him the most precious secret of the military commander, too late except for use in parry-

ing Grant's blows of 1864. Sherman never learned this great lesson of tactics, although he mastered many others. Sheridan was taught it at Winchester; Thomas learned it at Chickamauga and practiced it with a wonderfully sure hand at Nashville. I do not know where Joffre learned it, but he used it with skill in the First Battle of the Marne as did Petain in the Second Battle of the Marne.

This lesson which had escaped McDowell, Buell, McClellan, Burnside and every other Union leader was worth to the Union all the time and losses at Belmont, Donelson, and Shiloh which it had cost to teach it to Grant. In the absence of any school of applied theory in that epoch it could only be taught by favoring experience and then only to the apt pupil.

Shiloh, perhaps Grant's most vital personal experience, was followed by another two months' period of gestation during which Halleck joined in person the Army of the Tennessee and assigned Grant as second in command with no duties save to observe and to reflect.

Thereafter Grant, again in command, had various minor experiences which time does not permit our following out, but which served more fully to equip him for the problems of the Vicksburg campaign the following year. In that campaign Grant displayed the same knowledge and skill and displayed it in much the same manner as had Napoleon in his Ulm campaign in 1805. The only difference was that what Napoleon had learned partly at school and partly through his experience in Italy Grant had learned almost wholly from his experience in the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland valleys. Never did experience teach more patiently and persistently, harshly at times, yet always with ample periods for recovery of balance and inward absorption. Always in independent command, first with 3,000 men (Belmont), then 9,000 (Henry), then 18,000 (Donelson), next 36,000 (Shiloh), lastly 72,000 (Vicksburg),

making all the beginner's mistakes but profiting by each and fortunately not having his career wrecked by them, who else is there in all history who has been given such a military education?

One marked feature of Grant's military education was its leisurely progress. Following the surrender of Vicksburg he again had a period of inaction of three months' duration. Just what use Grant made of these periods of inactivity there is no evidence to show. He did not, apparently, as Napoleon used to do between campaigns, have maps prepared of the battlefields and study the past operations with a view to extracting the utmost to be derived from a thorough knowledge of the complete facts. Yet his own conduct showed that he did learn from them; and I cannot escape the conviction that these periods of protracted inaction and reflection were as essential to his mastering of the military art as were the intermittent periods of activity.

It is well, however, to point out to such as may have military ambitions that never again under modern conditions of warfare are we likely to have a conflict drag on through intermittent fighting, awaiting the education in action of the general to end it. The general-in-chief in another great war may not begin his education at a staff college but it is certain that he will begin it at his desk and following staff college methods, and not, as Grant began it, by commanding in a muddled fight like Belmont.

In July, 1863, Grant was merely one of three successful Union generals, Meade and Rosecrans being the other two. Meade during the autumn proved a disappointment while Rosecrans, defeated at Chickamauga, was a still greater one. It was thus only natural that in October Grant should be called to Tennessee to raise the resultant siege of Chattanooga. Here he met his first problem in command of combined armies, for the Army of the Cumberland was to be reinforced by the Army of the Tennessee, brought from

Vicksburg under Sherman, and by Hooker's Corps borrowed from the Army of the Potomac.

Grant's orders for the attack on Bragg's army on Missionary Ridge showed the same rawness in the new and more complex game of commanding armies that his orders for Belmont had shown in the handling of a brigade. Grant ignored three important considerations: First, he overlooked the need of giving each of his armies an appropriate mission in the approaching battle. His own former Army of the Tennessee, now under Sherman, was to make the attack while the Army of the Cumberland under Thomas was to look on. Second, he antagonized Thomas' men and Hooker's men by appearing to conduct the operations so as to reflect credit on his own former army and consequently to discredit further the Cumberland Army still stinging from its defeat at Chickamauga and disgruntled over its half-rations during the siege of Chattanooga. Third, Grant, finding Bragg's front formidable in appearance, adopted a flank attack without any reconnoissance to determine whether the terrain was feasible for such an attack, which it proved not to be. Yet he had been in Chattanooga over a month before the battle.

A spirit of emulation between rival units, whether divisions, corps, or armies, serving side by side is an admirable thing; yet seldom can the higher commander afford to take sides in such rivalries. That Grant's inexperience led him to appear to do so might easily have compromised the hoped-for victory; that it did not do so in this instance was owing to Grant's having assigned Sherman an impossible task and, through lack of broader tactical experience, having assigned to Thomas an easy assaulting position though with orders to demonstrate only and not to attack. The men themselves, stung by the insult to their army and their commander, won a soldiers' victory by refusing to halt and going on to the capture of Missionary Ridge.

Pope, in 1862, was ruined by a similar display of partisanship. Grant, more fortunate in 1863, was saved from the consequences of his own faulty conception, plan, and orders by the fact that his errors in the psychological estimate of his own army and his faulty estimate of the terrain neutralized each other.

This victory brought Grant, after another three months' period for digestion and assimilation of his experience, to Washington and to the assignment to command all the armies of the United States. This put him to the supreme test of a military commander of his time and gave him the new rôle of planning and ordering campaigns rather than battles.

Circumstances combined to render this rôle easy for him. His loyal and trusted friend, Sherman, in command of all the troops in the western theater of war, required, as Grant saw it, only to be told what to do and when to do it, not how to do it. This confidence in Sherman saved him the error of attempting to prescribe details for the campaigns at a distance from himself, an error which Napoleon fell into and which was one of the main factors of his ultimate ruin. Armies of a half million men are not to be commanded that way with good results. Grant had a further advantage in writing a directive for Sherman, in that he was personally acquainted with all important parts of the western theater from the mouth of the Mississippi to the Alleghanies, had had Sherman with him most of the time, and knew Sherman's ideas and what he could do.

As regards the plan of campaign for the more important eastern army, Grant had the advantage of being able to appreciate and to be guided by President Lincoln's sound strategic ideas as I have pointed out in a previous paper.[1]

In determining his own location as commander of all the armies Grant's experience in the West enabled him to decide

[1] "President Lincoln as War Statesman," in Wisconsin Historical Society *Proceedings*, 1916, 106-40.

correctly to accompany in the campaign the Army of the Potomac. His relationship to that army, however, was a more difficult problem for him and one the solution of which it took a month's bloody experience to teach. His experience with the Army of the Cumberland, which he had so strongly and unnecessarily antagonized at Chattanooga, had taught him the danger of hurting the pride or prestige of the Army of the Potomac by removing Meade, but he did hurt it in other ways. His first conception of his relationship to Meade was that of a superior mentor and guide. He began the campaign of 1864 in Virginia with a quite proper directive, along parallel lines to his directive to Sherman. But when, during the first day of the Wilderness fight he saw the battle going as any woods fight has always gone and probably always will go, as he had seen Donelson and Shiloh go, he lost his balance and without justification began to hector and to irritate Meade, Meade's staff, and Meade's army, and, further, to divide with him the tactical control and responsibility for the battle. But that action by itself was not the worst phase of Grant's conduct. By mixing in Meade's business he was not only compromising the fighting power of the army he had chosen to accompany but was neglecting his own straight-forward military duty. This duty, as the military man views it today, and as Grant, himself, later in the campaign learned to view it, was to be able to tell Meade after the battle what to do next.

It was not decisive for the war whether the battle of the Wilderness was lost, won, or drawn; but it was virtually causative of prolonging the war another year that Grant, instead of at once solving his own problem and being able to tell Meade immediately at the conclusion of the battle what course to pursue next, required twenty-four hours to disentangle his own mind and extricate his staff from interfering in Meade's affairs sufficiently to enable him to formulate the next directive.

The decision itself, based on his Vicksburg lesson, was correct, but Grant was here opposed, not to the lumbering Pemberton but to the nimble-witted Lee, himself trained as Grant was trained by two years of practical work. The consequence of this tardiness of decision and orders was that Lee was able to anticipate Grant's next move on Spotsylvania and to defeat his purpose. Very different would have been the result had Grant been ready to give his decision on the evening of the second day's battle instead of the evening following; the strategic situation of the two armies would then have been reversed, all in Grant's favor.

As the campaign progresses we see Grant learning his own proper rôle and doing his own proper work, leaving Meade and his staff to do his; and as Grant learned to do this he gained the power to outwit Lee, notably in the crossing of the James. But unfortunately the process of disentangling himself and his staff from the immediate control of the Army of the Potomac proved as costly in casualties and as bitter in consequences as the original intermeddling had been. The mixing in by Grant had led Meade and his subordinates to expect from him direct interference and positive tactical orders; consequently when Grant settled back after Spotsylvania and confined himself more and more to his own appropriate sphere of directives, Meade was slow to reassume full control and made the natural error of continuing to interpret Grant's directives as positive orders. It was this error which caused the unjustifiable slaughter at Cold Harbor which resulted in the final weakening of the temper and clouding of the prestige of the Army of the Potomac. The immediate responsibility for it was Meade's; but in the ultimate the blame is Grant's for not making clear to Meade the change in his conception of their relationship. In his *Memoirs* Grant rightly assumes responsibility for the failure and the losses.

Here then at Cold Harbor stands a man, forty-two years of age, who, in as complete a course of two years and a half

on the conduct of military operations as was ever offered at a military staff college, has finally taken his last examination and been graduated as proficient in the conduct of a brigade, division, corps, army, and group of armies.

The comparisons suggested between the empirical methods of Grant's military education and those means whereby the younger officer is now taught the same vital lessons of tactics in the school of the line and the staff college have doubtless raised in the reader's mind at least two questions: First, would a staff college graduate, had there been one, have been able to do with the Northern armies in 1861 what Grant did with them in 1864? Second, was it our staff college graduates who won the war with Germany for us?

I cannot in answering these two questions give any assurance that any staff college graduate placed in McClellan's shoes in 1861 would necessarily have done any better than did McClellan; nor can I state with confidence that the staff college graduate won the late war any more than the non-graduate. Both won it. I might, for example, name non-school-trained officers who rose in action brilliantly and deservedly, one from brigade, one from regimental commander, both to the grade of corps commander, and who needed no mentors as to how to exercise command. I might also cite as examples three staff college graduates who rose from the grade of colonel to command divisions and who would have gone farther had the war lasted longer. But, in the usual case, the graduate of the staff college had not enough rank at the outset to become a general and was therefore put on the general staff and assigned to some general either as chief of staff or in some other capacity. Then the result depended on how the two worked together and on the actual thoroughness with which the staff college man had mastered his lessons. Many generals who had such graduates as chiefs of staff, but who failed to learn how to make use of them, also failed to make progress in action and were

weeded out ruthlessly by those higher up, who demanded constant success. Other generals having graduates as chiefs of staff leaned on them too confidently, only to find them broken reeds, and in such cases both the general and the chief of staff were often, to use the soldier phrase, "canned" at the same time.

The enviable professional opportunities afforded the lower-ranking staff graduate, when assigned to a general who could appreciate his ability, may be illustrated by the half joking, half serious remarks exchanged one evening between two generals of high rank. They were dining together in France shortly before the armistice with only their respective chiefs of staff present.

"I wonder," said the older general to the younger, "if you have one of those chiefs of staff, like mine, who tells you everything to do, where to go, and what to say."

"Yes, I have," replied the other, "I never did anything he did not tell me to do but once, and I never cease to shudder over the muddle I got into that time!"

In the case of those two generals and in that of many others success and fame came to them through finding a staff college graduate who had mastered his art and was not only willing but eager to grasp the opportunity to practice it, perfectly content that his general should get the popular credit for it and anxious only that the work should be well done. The real people, he was aware, those on the inside, knew who was doing the work, who was really responsible, and the others did not matter.

This resulted in a situation somewhat akin to that which existed in the former German army in which princes and kings were titular heads of corps and armies, while highly trained, trusted, and tried staff officers did their work. The German Crown Prince in 1870, for example, though nominally an army commander, was in reality a mere puppet in the hands of his chief of staff, and the Crown Prince in the

recent war was the same. It is evident that so long as we continue to pursue the policy of regarding higher appointments in the army as rewards to be given for political services rendered, such a system is not only inevitable but desirable for us also. The system has its drawbacks, however, for if some high-ranking general gets a young and conceited general staff chief who does not really know very much but who thinks that he does it makes for trouble all the way up and down the line.

There was plenty of friction from such causes in our army in France. Of our staff college men serving in staff positions, from the highest down to the division, the lowest unit which has a general staff, we may say that some made "excellent," some merely "good," some only "fair." Other staff college men failed utterly, both as staff officers and as commanders. In such cases it was not a failure of knowledge so much as of character; they simply had not the requisite stamina.

In other words there is no more assurance that any particular officer passed through the staff college will come out a competent military leader than there is that anyone who passed through Grant's experiences in 1861-62 would develop the talent to conduct successfully a Vicksburg campaign in 1863. But tactics is to be learned, just as arithmetic, by doing many examples and solving many problems. Fortunate is the man who has the opportunity to learn his tactical lessons in the staff school, at the expense only of the sweat of his own brow, the rebukes of his instructors, and the anguish only of his own mind over his tactical sins and shortcomings as one after another they are discovered and held up in garish light for correction. And if happy is the man who can thus learn, still more fortunate is the government and country where proved, competent staff college graduates are plentiful and where they, and not the court favorites, are put in positions of high military responsibility.

What it cost to educate and graduate Grant in his practical course in military art, in lives, money, and resources I leave it to others to calculate if they choose. For myself the important fact is that he was finally educated and able to end the war the right way for the people of the United States. What it now seems increasingly important for the people of this country to understand, as we become more enmeshed in world politics, is that Grant, Napoleon, Caesar, and most others popularly regarded as inspired military geniuses were not geniuses at all, in the popular sense, but simply human beings trained and finally graduated either in the school of hard, actual experience or in a professional school presided over by a Moltke, a Foch, a Douglas Haig, or a Morrison.

Our people need also to realize that in a modern war, against a nation fighting under leaders already trained when war begins, we cannot hope to win if we plan for the education of the military leader in our next war to take the time, expenditure of money, and wastage of lives, necessary to educate Grant.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

This study makes no pretense at being a history of Grant's military career; it is intended merely to serve as a partial interpretation of that career along tactical lines. The sources for it are chiefly the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion. The biographies of Grant by Badeau, Coppee, King, and others all assume that that attack or defense which succeeded was therefore correct; they are, in other words, not written on a critical tactical basis. *Grant's Campaign in 1864*, by Major C. F. Atkinson of the British Army, and Colonel Willey Howell's study of the same campaign, in volume one of the *Military Historian and Economist*, constitute valuable introductions to a military analysis of that campaign. In the latter volume will be found a study by myself of Fort Donelson. For the remainder, after

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employing the Scribner series on the Civil War for orientation purposes it is recommended that one go direct to the Official Records which richly repay investigation by the student of military history. Grant's earlier career, before Belmont, not touched on here, is especially interesting. The chief sources for it will be found in the Official Records, War of the Rebellion, Series I, Vol. III, pp. 130 and 430-48 for the Ironton command, and pp. 452-65 for the Jefferson City command, and p. 141 et seq. for the Cairo command. See also Correspondence in Series II, Vol. I. These earlier reports and correspondence suffice to give a distinct, characteristic, and most agreeable picture of Grant's good qualifications, his simplicity, directness, and common sense. Until Belmont he had not learned caution in dealing with superiors and associates and wrote as he thought. For the Belmont reports see Official Records, Series I, Vol. III, pp. 266-364. For the other campaigns and battles reference to the General Index of the Rebellion Records (Serial number 130) is recommended.

Grant's *Memoirs*, written late in life, are psychologically interesting but not militarily instructive. Grant's military knowledge, like a foreign language learned late in life, apparently fell away from him with disuse. He forgot what he had done and why he did it. His own course he quite humanly sought to justify and his own rôle and importance quite as humanly to magnify, naïvely oblivious of the existence of either tendency in himself. Because of lack of critical aid in the preparation of his *Memoirs* they contain frequent errors of fact as well as of interpretation.